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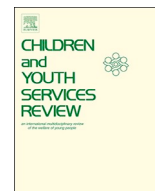
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# 'It can never be as perfect as home': An explorative study into the fostering experiences of unaccompanied refugee children, their foster carers and social workers



Jet Rip<sup>a,\*</sup>, Elianne Zijlstra<sup>a</sup>, Wendy Post<sup>a</sup>, Margrite Kalverboer<sup>a</sup>, Erik J. Knorth<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Study Centre for Children, Migration and Law, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Research shows that highly supportive living arrangements, such as foster care, can provide an environment that meets the needs of unaccompanied children (i.e. fewer internalizing problems, higher quality of the child-rearing environment). However, there is limited research into the experiences of these children in (cultural) foster care. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of former unaccompanied refugee children and unaccompanied refugee children, their carers and social workers with regard to the foster placement. This cross-sectional qualitative study combined semi-structured interviews with questionnaires. In general, participants were satisfied with the foster placement. However, some children also reported negative experiences during their foster placement or felt somewhat uncomfortable, but they still rated the placement as successful. Children and carers valued the cultural similarity of the foster placement. Former unaccompanied children appreciated cultural similarity less. Overall, participants valued similarity of language the most. Several children did not feel at home in their foster placement. In most foster families, the caregiving environment offered to children seemed adequate.

## 1. Introduction

In the last five years, an average of almost 1,800 unaccompanied refugee children per year applied for asylum in the Netherlands, most of them arriving from Eritrea or Syria (Dutch Senate, 2014; IND, 2019). The Nidos Foundation (i.e., the Dutch guardianship organization for unaccompanied refugee children; hereafter Nidos)<sup>1</sup> provides temporary guardianship for children who arrive without their parents and apply for asylum (Spinder & Van Hout, 2008). A guardian is appointed for each unaccompanied refugee child on entry to the Netherlands. 'In the absence of the parent the guardian fulfils the parental duties and ensures that the care offered to the young person is properly provided, while intervening if this care is inadequate' (Nidos, 2016, p. 6). Children are placed in different types of care based on their age, asylum status, needs and vulnerability (Zijlstra et al., 2017). All children under 15 years of age are placed in foster families (Nidos, 2017), preferably in

families that are known to the child or connected with or close to the child's cultural background (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015; Spinder, Van Hout, & Hesser, 2010).

Studies comparing different types of accommodation in relation to the mental health of unaccompanied refugee children (hereafter: unaccompanied children) show that highly-supportive living arrangements, such as foster care, can provide an environment that meets the needs of those children (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, & Spinhoven, 2007; Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunliff, 2008; Kalverboer et al., 2017; Mitra & Hodes, 2019; Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Zijlstra et al., 2019). For example, the quality of the child-rearing environment was higher for unaccompanied children in foster care than for those in other forms of care (Kalverboer et al., 2017) and children in highly-supportive living arrangements had fewer internalizing problems (Bean et al., 2007) and fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms (Hodes et al., 2008). However, there is limited research into the experiences of these children in foster

\* Corresponding author at: Study Centre for Children, Migration and Law, Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care, University of Groningen, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 TJ Groningen, the Netherlands.

E-mail address: [j.a.rip@rug.nl](mailto:j.a.rip@rug.nl) (J. Rip).

<sup>1</sup> We prefer not to use abbreviations (such as URM or URC) for children. In our study, we use the term *former* unaccompanied (refugee) children when referring to children just over the age of 18.

care, especially in ‘cultural foster care’,<sup>2</sup> and little is known about the outcomes of these placements (Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Hek, 2007; Van Holen, Trogh, Carlier, & Vanderfaeille, 2016; Wade, 2019; Wade, Sirriyeh, Kohli, & Simmonds, 2012). A few studies on placement success provide insights into the perspectives of children, carers and social workers (i.e., Bates et al., 2005; Ni Raghallaigh, 2013; Wade et al., 2012) but, to our knowledge, none of these studies included perspectives relating to the same placement.

## 2. Factors relating to outcomes of foster placements for unaccompanied refugee children

Sinclair and Wilson (2003, p. 874) define a foster placement as ‘successful’ when the foster carers and social workers involved in the foster placement (i.e. guardian and matcher) all say that the placement went ‘very well from the child’s point of view’. As we prefer to ‘take the child’s perspective’ (i.e. give children an opportunity to speak for themselves) rather than ‘having a child perspective’ (as is the case in Sinclair and Wilson’s definition) (Nilsson et al., 2015), we use the following definition: the placement is regarded as successful when the child, foster carers and social workers (guardian and matcher) are satisfied with the placement.

Sinclair and Wilson (2003) in a study of foster placements outcomes consider the interaction of three factors: 1. child factors (e.g., a child’s emotional and behavioural problems; a child’s previous experience of living in a foster family [Bates et al., 2005; Wade et al., 2012]); 2. foster carer factors (e.g., carers’ prior experience with migration [Wade et al., 2012]); and 3. interaction factors (i.e., the interaction between the unaccompanied child and the other members of the foster family, as expressed, for example, in the degree to which the child matches the family and carers’ characteristics). Others have also addressed the influence of societal factors on the success of the foster placement. For example, Cousins (2011) raised the issue of racism in UK society, where white culture still predominates, prompting concerns about cross-cultural foster placements. In our study, we prefer to combine two of the above-mentioned factors, namely *foster carer factors* and *interaction factors*, identified here as *fostering factors*.

In this article we will focus on *fostering factors* since the qualitative nature of the study allows description of the contact (i.e., interaction) within the foster family. We will address the themes of ‘cultural similarity between child and foster family’, ‘the child feeling at home’ and ‘caregiving environment’, as we expect these themes to shed the most light on the interaction between the child and the foster family members, including the significance of that interaction for placement success (or non-success).

### 2.1. Cultural similarity

Culture can be defined as ‘the rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values prevalent among people in a society’ (Schwartz, 2004, p. 43). Matching by cultural similarities includes looking at similarities between children and carers in terms of country of origin, religion, language and ethnicity (Anderson & Linares, 2012; Wade et al., 2012). According to Cousins (2011, p. 37), religious aspects of a match seem to be taken into account more often, especially if the child is Muslim. However, ‘prioritising religion in isolation can lead to cultural dislocation’. She gives an example of a Pakistani Muslim child placed with Muslim carers who were Turkish Cypriots or Moroccan Berbers, which ‘does not suggest itself to be a good cultural match’ (p. 37).

Placements where the child and the carers have a similar cultural background contribute to positive experiences, especially early in

resettlement (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988). Foster parents state that *cultural similarity* with their foster child is beneficial to the child’s functioning, as they can share experiences of hardship, they are able to maintain connections with the child’s birth family and pre-existing support networks and they share a common language and family customs (Brown, George, Sintzel, & St. Arnault, 2009). Foster carers also feel better prepared to ‘do the job’ if they match their foster child in terms of religion or country of origin (Wade, 2019). Children themselves have differing needs regarding the degree of cultural similarity within the foster placement (Barrie & Mendes, 2011; Hek, 2007; Kidane, 2001; Stanley, 2001; Yaya, 1996). For a placement to be successful, a child’s cultural needs must be addressed. However, this can be done in both cultural foster placements and cross-cultural placements (Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Wade et al. (2012), who studied both perspectives, report that the process of feeling at home was accelerated when children and their foster families spoke a similar language or had the same religion or customs.

On the other hand, negative consequences of cultural placements have also been reported. Some children fear that the cultural foster family will hand over information that could expose their birth family in the country of origin to risks (Yaya, 1996). Adaptation to a new situation can also take longer, because foster carers have less knowledge of the host country’s language (Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015) or have less knowledge of the system (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988).

### 2.2. Feeling at home

‘Home can mean where one usually lives, or it can mean where one’s family lives, or it can mean one’s native country’ (Ahmed, 1999, p. 338). Ahmed clearly highlights how difficult it is to grasp the meaning of home, let alone, the meaning of feeling at home. For those forced to flee their country of origin, home-seeking is much more than looking for shelter and political sanctuary (Kohli, 2011); it is ‘a process that involves emotional identifications such as close social relationships and experiences of familiarity’ (Wernesjö, 2015, p. 454). Therefore, *feeling at home* is a state of being that can only be judged by the children themselves. In order to feel at home in their foster family, unaccompanied children ‘wanted normality, to feel safe and protected [...], to be treated equally to others within the household’ and ‘to feel that they belonged (to the extent that they needed to)’ (Wade et al., 2012, p. 289). This feeling of belonging is especially important for children living in a foster family that is visibly culturally different from their own (Connolly, 2014; Phoenix, 2016).

### 2.3. Caregiving environment

The caregiving environment refers to the environment in which the child grows up. The Best Interest of the Child Model (BIC-Model) defines 14 conditions for child development, which concern the family as well as the society (Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Zijlstra, 2012). Growing up in an inadequate caregiving environment, especially if this lasts for a long time, regularly leads to developmental problems in children (Rutter, Silberg, O’Conner, & Simonoff, 1999, as cited in Zijlstra, 2012). In the Netherlands, Nidos has been granted exclusive statutory responsibility to provide an adequate *caregiving environment* for unaccompanied refugee children. Positive parenting behaviour can contribute to a better quality of the caregiving environment. The parenting behaviour of foster carers can be characterized by two main dimensions: *support* (i.e. parenting behaviour that expresses care and affective involvement with the child) and *control* (i.e. parenting behaviour whereby the carer provides information and explains why the child should or should not do something, and sets rules that limit the child’s freedom to act) (Deković, Groenendaal, Noom, & Gerrits, 1996, as cited in Knorth, 2016).

*Support*. Foster carers link a ‘good relationship’ with the child to whether the child was easy to care for, the child’s level of integration

<sup>2</sup> ‘Cultural foster care’ or ‘cultural placement’ refers to a situation in which the child and the foster carers have a similar cultural background.

into the foster family and whether the child had a sense of belonging or attachment to the foster carers (Wade, 2019, p. 386). Also, carers who supported their foster child, for example with their asylum claim, further developed emotional bonds with their children. Unaccompanied children varied in terms of the level of attachment or intimacy that they expected from their carers. Some wanted to form close ties, referring to their carers as ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ or ‘auntie’ and ‘uncle’, whereas others ‘simply wanted caring, respectful relationships’ (Wade et al., 2012, p. 113). Living with other children in the foster family could influence the success of the placement. Although living with culturally matched foster siblings could be helpful, rivalry between the child and the birth children in the foster family (Bates et al., 2005; Brown & Bednar, 2006) could negatively influence the placement.

**Control.** Unaccompanied children differed in the level of structure and rules that they expected from carers (Bates et al., 2005; Wade, 2019). In particular, children who had been making their own decisions for years had difficulty accepting parental rules (Bates et al., 2005). Moreover, challenges occurred when children and carers had different cultural expectations about their role in the foster family (Bates et al., 2005). According to social workers, equal treatment of foster children and birth children by carers was also important (Wade et al., 2012). Previous studies have emphasized that giving room to and respecting the child’s individuality can be safeguarded by addressing the individual needs of the child, for example, by respecting the child’s cultural background (Chase, Knight, & Statham, 2008) or providing food from the child’s country of origin (Wade et al., 2012).

This study examines the experiences of unaccompanied children, their foster carers and social workers with the foster placement, with regard to the factors contributing to placement success as identified in the literature. It also looks at the experiences of former unaccompanied children. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1. What are the experiences of children and their carers regarding their cultural similarity? 2. What are children’s experiences of feeling at home in the foster family? 3. What are the experiences of children, their carers and social workers in relation to the caregiving environment provided by carers? 4. How do children, their carers and social workers evaluate the success of the foster placement? We have included the perspectives of children, carers and social workers so that we do not overlook key factors contributing to the success of a foster placement for unaccompanied children.

### 3. Method

The data in this cross-sectional qualitative study, which uses data triangulation (Natow, 2019), were collected between December 2017 and March 2018. Approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences, University of Groningen.

Doing research with unaccompanied refugee children comes with practical and ethical challenges (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2014; Hopkins, 2008). Hopkins (2008) points out issues related to ethical approval, research design, access to the research, obtaining informed consent, and privacy and confidentiality. By using a child-friendly information flyer to explain details of the research and making clear that children – and carers – could refuse to answer questions or stop without giving a reason (cf. Hopkins, 2008), we tried to overcome some of these challenges. Also, taking time to build trust and ensuring ‘that children are able to discuss the meanings behind their responses themselves’ (Due et al., 2014, p. 220), increased the depth of the results. The use of multiple methods (i.e., non-verbal research methods, interview questions, quantitative questionnaires) helped to ensure that the results ‘will be valid across a diverse range of experiences, as well as sensitive to differences resulting from cultural or ethnic background’ (Due et al., 2014, p. 223).

#### 3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of unaccompanied refugee children<sup>3</sup> ( $n = 5$ ), their foster carers ( $n = 5$  from three families) and social workers ( $n = 5$  guardians;  $n = 5$  matchers). Unaccompanied children who had previously lived in a foster family (hereafter: former unaccompanied children;  $n = 5$ ) were also included in this study. The participating children were under the guardianship of Nidos, were living in foster families – either *traditional foster care* (families not known to the child) or *kinship care* (family members or extended networks) (De Ruijter de Wildt et al., 2015) – had a mastery of Dutch or English, and were older than 10.5 years of age. Former unaccompanied children were born in 1998 or 1999, no longer lived with their foster family at the time of the study, and had left their foster family up to three years previously. A specific request was also made to include two former unaccompanied children who experienced an (unwanted) premature placement breakdown<sup>4</sup> in order to gain insight into the factors hindering placement success.

In total, 1052 unaccompanied children ( $n = 902$  kinship foster care;  $n = 150$  traditional foster care) in the Nidos database matched these criteria. We selected 15 children in traditional care and 15 in kinship care, aiming for a widespread distribution of characteristics with respect to nationality, age, gender and duration of placement. We also checked whether the selected participants were representative of the total sample. The children who responded positively to our invitation participated in our study. Several did not want to participate or guardians did not respond to our request because they considered the child to be too vulnerable (at that moment of time) or had no time to discuss participation with the child. From the total 224 former unaccompanied children in the database, a selection was made based on place of residence ( $n = 45$ ). As a consequence, those who still lived in the foster family or those whose contact details were not available were excluded. The remaining former unaccompanied children ( $n = 16$ ) were approached in a particular order, whereby we aimed for a distribution of characteristics with respect to nationality, gender and previous experience of a breakdown. The first five former unaccompanied children who agreed to participate were included in our study.

The children<sup>5</sup> came from seven countries of origin. Most of the children were male (70%) and lived in a kinship foster family (80%) (see Table 1). Most children stayed with families that came from the same country of origin and, in most cases, children and carers practised the same religion. In two cases, the child was religious and the carers were not, or vice versa. All children could communicate with their carers using a common language (e.g. Arabic, Dutch). However, this was not always the child’s native language. While experiencing a breakdown was a specific inclusion criterion for only two former unaccompanied children, three others in our sample also experienced a breakdown (in total:  $n = 5$  children). One of the former unaccompanied children still lived with foster carers, although this was a criterion for exclusion. The authors decided to include the participant in the sample, as the participant could provide valuable information for the research question.

Foster carers and social workers related to the participating children

<sup>3</sup> Here, we followed the Dutch Government’s definition (2019b): ‘who was under 18 on arrival in the Netherlands, whose country of origin is outside the European Union, and who travelled to the Netherlands without a parent or other person exercising authority over them.’

<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of our research design (i.e. not including the carers and social workers of former unaccompanied children), we were not able to define whether a breakdown was wanted or unwanted, as the perspectives of carers and social workers were missing. Therefore, in this article, a breakdown refers to any premature placement breakdown, both wanted and unwanted, and is solely based on the child’s perspective.

<sup>5</sup> From here on, ‘children’ refers to both unaccompanied and former unaccompanied children.



**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics of unaccompanied children and former unaccompanied children.

Characteristics	Unaccompanied refugee child (n = 5)	Former unaccompanied refugee child (n = 5)
<i>Gender (number)</i>		
Male	3	4
Female	2	1
<i>Similarity of country of origin between child and carers (number)</i>		
Yes	4	3
No	1	2
<i>Type of placement (number)</i>		
Traditional foster placement	2	0
Kinship placement*	3	5
<i>Religion (number)</i>		
Islam	3	1
Christianity	1	1
Other	1	1
No religion	0	2
<i>Residence permit (number)</i>		
Yes	4	4
No	1	1
<i>Duration of placement, M (SD) (in months)</i>	18.2 (10.2)	
<i>Time in the Netherlands, M (SD) (in months)</i>	25.4 (3.6)	43.8 (30.9)

\* Kinship placement includes placement with relatives who were not known to the child in the country of origin.

were selected. In two foster families, both carers took part in the research. However, in one of these cases, one carer participated only partially, due to time constraints. The foster carers (n = 5, three of whom were male) came from three different countries. Two of the three placements were kinship placements, although all carers had a similar country of origin to their child.

Social workers were selected based on 'their participating child'. One of them (a matcher) was interviewed about two children in the sample.

### 3.2. Interview and questionnaires

#### 3.2.1. Interview

*(Former) Unaccompanied refugee children.* Topics in the semi-structured interviews with children included the child's cultural identity, feeling at home in the foster family, the child's relationship with foster carers and with other children living in the family. Non-verbal research methods, such as a 'lifeline' and 'drawings of houses', were also used in the interview to help children to share their stories (Van Os, Zijlstra, Post, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2018). Some children made use of these non-verbal methods, while others preferred to only talk. Some additional questions were asked of former unaccompanied children (e.g. 'Looking back at that period, are there things you would like to have been different?' and 'Are there things that could have made it easier for you to share your experiences during that period?'). One interview was in English, while the rest were in Dutch.

*Foster carers.* Topics in the semi-structured interviews with foster carers included the cultural identity of foster carer(s), characteristics of the foster family (e.g. family composition, other foster children in the family, placement type) and the carers' relationship with the child.

*Social workers.* Topics in the interviews with social workers included the caregiving environment provided by the carers. For example, they were asked about the relationship between the child and the carers, and about what was going well and what was not.

#### 3.2.2. Questionnaires

Participants were asked to fill in a several questionnaires. In the

'Cultural Questionnaire' (CQ, Rip, Kalverboer, Knorth, Post, & Zijlstra, 2017) children rated the importance of cultural similarity in relation to 'country of origin', 'religion', 'language' and 'ethnicity' for themselves and their carers, and vice versa (appreciation of cultural similarity). Several other (open) questions relating to culture were also presented to the participants.

The success of the placement was measured by a 1-item scale question in which participants indicated how satisfied they were with the foster placement. All responses were converted into report scores ranging from 0 to 10. If two foster carers filled in the questionnaire regarding the same child, their average score was calculated. We used qualified translators to translate the questionnaire items from Dutch into English; two translations and two back-translations were produced, and these were reviewed by two people (see also Guillemin, Bombardier, & Beaton, 1993).

### 3.3. Procedure

Former unaccompanied children were contacted directly by phone by the first author, and unaccompanied children were contacted through their guardians. Guardians were able to use the information flyer to explain the research study. Children, carers and social workers were interviewed separately and – with the exception of a Skype interview with one social worker – face-to-face. Participants could choose where to have the interview. Some children (n = 5) preferred a place other than their current home.

At the start of the interview, all participants were asked for their *informed consent*; it was stressed that the results would be processed anonymously and confidentially. The stories told by the children would not be shared with their carer(s) or social workers, and vice versa. All participants were also told that in the event that the child was in danger, the researcher had a duty to act in accordance with the Model Protocol for Child Abuse and Domestic Violence (Dutch Government, 2019a). The instrument measuring the success of the placement was filled in at the end of each interview. Participants could have as many breaks as they wished and could stop without giving a reason. Both children and carers received a small present to thank them for their participation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Coding and data analysis were conducted in Atlas.ti 8.3. Both theory-driven and data-driven codes were assigned to the transcripts (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011), whereby codes were assigned to large text segments, so that the (cultural) context was always considered (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). The deductive codebook, developed on the basis of factors relating to successful placement as identified in the literature – was further refined during the process of open and axial coding (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The transcripts of all participants were coded using the same codebook.

The mean scores and ranges of appreciation of cultural similarity and placement success are presented below, based on the outcomes of the instruments (cultural questionnaire; instrument measuring the success of the placement).

## 4. Results

The experiences of children in foster care regarding their stay in the foster family are discussed in relation to the themes 'cultural similarity' (between the child and the foster family), 'feeling at home', 'caregiving environment' and 'success of the placement'. The experiences of foster carers and social workers with these foster placements are also addressed.

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics for the appreciation of cultural similarity ( $N = 13$ ).

	Country of origin M (range)	Religion M (range)	Language M (range)
<i>Appreciation of cultural similarity</i>			
Unaccompanied children ( $n = 5$ )	8.0 (5.0–10)	8.9 (4.5–10)	8.7 (6.1–10)
Foster carers ( $n = 3$ )	7.1 (0.0–10)	7.0 (0.0–10)	9.4 (7.7–10)
Former unaccompanied children ( $n = 5$ )	4.0 (0.0–7.6)	3.7 (0.1–9.7)	8.5 (2.0–10)

Note. 0 = respondent does not appreciate cultural similarity at all; 10 = respondent very much appreciates cultural similarity.

#### 4.1. Cultural similarity

Overall, participants placed the greatest value on cultural similarity of language (measured with the CQ) (see Table 2). A notable result is that the former unaccompanied children in this study had less appreciation of cultural similarity, with the exception of similarity of language. Moreover, several participants (both children and carers) had difficulty filling in the questionnaire in relation to ethnicity (e.g. they did not know their ethnicity, had no ethnicity or identified their ethnicity only after the researcher had given several options). Therefore, we present no results for similarity of ethnicity.

##### 4.1.1. Children's views

*Cultural similarity and its appreciation.* Several children appreciated cultural similarity (in relation to country of origin, religion and language) between them and carer(s) to some degree. In a culturally similar foster family, life was easier, they felt more at home and were less stressed about how to do certain things. The child and carers could understand each other better, not only because they spoke a similar language, but also because of not having to explain 'their culture' or needing to ask about the carers' culture. Living in a cross-cultural family appeared difficult for some children:

*I can live [with] everybody, but for your own country is always better than the other people.* (Hasan<sup>6</sup>, 17 years old)

Other children, mainly former unaccompanied children, placed less value on cultural similarity. For them, feeling safe was more important. They preferred Dutch culture, valued getting to know other cultures, or disliked the culture of their country of origin.

Most children whose religion was similar to that of their carers were satisfied with the religious customs practised at home (e.g. praying together). Two Muslim children who lived in an Islamic foster family talked about Islamic requirements in relation to non-related people of the opposite sex living together. For example, one boy said that he could not be in the same room as his foster mother if she was not wearing her hijab. Therefore, he felt a lack of freedom in his non-relative foster home. Some children did not value cultural similarity of religion or said that they did not want to live with carers who had strong religious beliefs. One child (an atheist) said that her foster mother forced her to wear a hijab:

*I was [a] sort of fake Muslim. I had to pretend to believe, while I did not believe. It is tough [...] not to be yourself. [...] why would I fake pray? But back then, I was 16, so I had not much choice, you know.* (Bilan, 18 years old)

Most children valued cultural similarity of language and were satisfied with the language they spoke at home.

##### 4.1.2. Foster carers' views

*Cultural similarity and its appreciation.* Two foster families valued cultural similarity in all aspects, while the other family stated that only similarity of language (not necessarily the carers' native language) was important to them. For that family, language similarity made it easier to explain what was permitted and what was not. Carers mentioned similar reasons for appreciating cultural similarity to what children reported (i.e. easy to communicate, better understanding of each other's culture). However, carers mentioned one additional aspect: cultural similarity helped children to get along well with other children in the family.

#### 4.2. Feeling at home

##### 4.2.1. Children's views

*How children defined feeling at home.* Some children did not understand the concept of 'feeling at home'. Other children, when asked what feeling at home meant to them, said that it was related to feeling safe (at home). The presence of family and having your own place were also important aspects. In addition, feeling at home was linked to feeling appreciated and being yourself at home, receiving emotional support from carers, and lastly, being able to do the things you want to do. One child clearly defined what feeling at home meant:

*Can you, the air in your home, kind of easy breathing. And then uhh you can uhh sleep without thinking, kind of uhh you know uhh that you are not alone. Or you [have] uhh a difficult day, then you know, whether someone is going to talk [with you] or that you have food, you know, you know the people there.* (Arslan, 15 years old)

*Feeling at home in the foster family.* Several children did not feel at home in their foster family. While for some this was because their mother or family was not living with them, others experienced too many struggles living with their foster family, felt that they could not be themselves at home or reported that they did not know their carers. The following quote illustrates how the lack of freedom in the foster family affected daily life:

*I first take a look when, when someone sleeps or uh you know or uh [...] if I should turn down, let's say, the TV. But in my family, I do not, I do not worry, I solely do, yes, what I want. If my mum comes [and] says what are you doing, please turn the music uhh down. Then I, I accept just uhh like normal. But yes, it is different than uhh in the family. I cannot do everything, kind of.* (Abraham, 18 years old)

Some children explained that they could never feel at home in their foster family:

*Because still, I still feel not at home really. No, I can never feel at home. Yes, I think no one would actually feel that. It is just a kind of uhh you just do it to survive.* (Arslan, 15 years old)

Children who felt at home in their foster family said that they liked their house or had a similar life in their country of origin. They also felt respected by their carers or said that they and their carers understood each other. These aspects were mentioned alongside some of the criteria reported in the previous section (how children defined feeling at home).

#### 4.3. Caregiving environment

##### 4.3.1. Children's views

*Affective family relationships.* Several children said that they had a normal or good relationship with their carers. When referring to these relationships, children talked about carer characteristics (e.g. being a good or a nice person, being open-minded) and the harmonious interaction between them and their carers, among carers themselves, or between carers and the child's relatives. They respected their carers, were not a burden to their carers, or vice versa. They could also share

<sup>6</sup> Fictitious personal names are used throughout this paper.

their past and current experiences with their carers (one of them learned to share experiences because of the carers), or their carers were aware of these experiences.

*I share everything with her, what I feel and what I have in my heart (Lian, 14 years old)*

Some children mentioned that their carers called them their 'son or daughter', which the children seemed to appreciate. However, for some this was not a mutual feeling:

*Actually, I have no feelings of father, because I had, yes, I have no father. [...] I cannot remember him, my father. That was just a yes, just a strange feeling with me. Dad. [...] Yes, [he] does only kind things to me and so on, just doesn't feel like a father. (Moussa, 14 years old)*

One unaccompanied child talked about having difficulties in the relationship with both carers. Other difficulties in the relationship are covered in the sections 'what children disliked in their foster family' and 'breakdown'.

Most children lived in foster families with other children – either the carers' birth children, other foster children or their own brothers or sisters – and were accepting of that. Some reported having a warm relationship with their 'brothers and sisters'. Those who did not live with other children did not miss it, however.

**Support from carers.** Children said that they were supported by their carers in practical matters, such as cooking, help with homework and initiating contact with the child's birth family. They had different needs regarding the boundaries that were set for them. Whilst one child was appreciative of the fact that everything was permitted, another child explicitly liked the carers setting rules and learned to respect the carers.

**What children liked in their foster family.** Children liked the fact that their foster family was caring, they enjoyed doing things together with their carers and they appreciated the support they got from them:

*He must also participate like my parents. And uhh if I just, so to speak, have the report at the end of the school year. He will also come, that he must know what I have done at school and what I have learned. (Jean, 18 years old)*

Living in a cultural foster family had its benefits: children were offered 'good food' and they came into contact with friends from the same culture through their foster family. In general, having your own room was seen as an advantage; however, some became accustomed to sharing a room or sleeping in the living room. Also, one child said that the absence of bad experiences was something positive about staying with the foster family.

**What children disliked in their foster family.** Several children could not think of anything they disliked in their foster family. Those who could had often experienced a placement breakdown (see 'breakdown').

Some children said that they had some minor problems, similar to what they experienced at home. One child disliked the fact that carers spoke to them in a language they could not understand and that they were confused with another foster child.

#### 4.3.2. Foster carers' views

**Affective family relationships.** All foster families reported having a normal or good relationship with their foster child. Carers described how the child enriched their lives, how they laughed together and how they liked to hear about the child's life. Carers also described the child as kind, sweet and not causing any problems and they appreciated that the child liked both carers. Two of the foster families could clearly imagine the problems experienced by their foster child, as they had experienced war themselves.

The foster families also referred to the fact that there was a good bond between the child and other children in the family. One family reported that their biological son started to cry when their foster child spent the night away from home.

**Support from carers.** Similar to what the children's reports said,

carers reported supporting their child with practical matters and setting rules. Unique to the carers' perspective was the advice that they gave to their foster children: advice on how to make the most of their lives or how to behave in the Netherlands, including the risks of not obeying the rules:

*I say, I saw two gays on the street. Two gays, giving [each other] a kiss. [I] say [that is] normal yeah, do not say filthy gay, no. (Abdi, foster carer)*

#### 4.3.3. Social workers' views

**Affective family relationships.** Social workers<sup>7</sup> highlighted several aspects that were going well in the relationship between children and carers, such as mutual respect, trust (sometimes because of family ties), no problems, good communication and the ability to discuss difficult subjects:

*Uhm well, what I thought was very good, was that he was very open and honest about how he felt, that he didn't really feel at home there and uhh... And then he said 'yes you are never [...] their own child' or something like that. And then [the foster mother] nodded and she said, well, that's right. [...] But also because she wanted to show him that he could just say that it was okay. That he didn't have to tell otherwise or something. (Nadja, social worker)*

In addition, social workers referred to carers' interest in the child (e.g. knowing what the child wanted and needed; knowing what was happening in the child's life; seeing the foster child as their own child) and the child's good or improved behaviour:

*So it is also uhh the confidence that foster father gives this boy and I think that his behaviour, because it has really been out of proportion, that uhh the foster father plays a very important role in this. [The child] becomes more aware of socially acceptable behaviour. And I can see that in him. [...] Yeah it's no longer, fuck this, fuck that... (Bart, social worker)*

According to the social workers, negative aspects in the relationship between children and carers often related to culture. For example, social workers hoped that carers would do more to support the child in school (e.g. going to the school intake or report meetings), something which seemed to be less expected of non-Dutch carers. Other negative aspects related to the child's behaviour (e.g. discrepancy between behaviour at school and at home) or the child's limited social skills. One social worker said that there was no relationship between carers and child, since it was 'one-way traffic' (from carers to the child).

#### 4.4. Success of the placement

In general, all participants were satisfied with the foster placement (see Table 3), as measured using the instrument for placement success. Foster carers were most positive about the foster placement, followed by children and then social workers. The experiences of participants in relation to placement success will be further explored below.

##### 4.4.1. Children's views

**Satisfaction with the foster placement.** Several children said that they could not be more satisfied with the placement than they were now. They were happy with the house and neighbourhood where they lived and felt comfortable with their foster family, sometimes because of family ties. They had developed good relationships (e.g. with friends, teachers) and they enjoyed the safety and freedom in the Netherlands. Several children preferred living in a foster family to living in an asylum

<sup>7</sup> Some social workers mentioned that they predominantly had contact with one of the carers – even though all unaccompanied refugee children in the sample were taken care of by two carers – or that they (i.e. the matchers) had difficulty reflecting on the current situation in the foster placement.

**Table 3**  
Success ratings for the foster care placement for each participant group.

	n	M	Min.	Max.
Unaccompanied children	5	9.0	7.7	10.0
Former unaccompanied children	5	8.9	7.5	10.0
Foster families	3	9.3	8.1	10.0
Social workers	9	8.3	6.6	10.0

Note. The success of the placement was scored by all participants (range: 0–10). One former unaccompanied child stayed with two foster families and filled in the questionnaire for both families. An average score for these two placements was used to calculate the overall mean. If there were two carers, average scores were used to calculate the overall mean. One matcher did not fill in the questionnaire because they were not aware of the current situation in the foster family.

centre:

*Or you want to live in this family, where you get food, and [...] everything [is a] little bit better. Or you can live in an asylum centre, where is much less. So, which one would you choose?* (Arslan, 15 years old)

Even after experiencing negative things in the foster family or not feeling comfortable in the placement, children were satisfied with the placement. These children explained that there was no better option, that they just had to accept their current situation or that they learned from these experiences. One child said:

*...I experienced [it] and that was it. It was a lesson for me, a free lesson.* (Bilan, 18 years old)

One child did not want to explain why (s)he was not fully satisfied with the placement.

**Breakdown.** Half of the participating children (including former unaccompanied children) experienced one or more breakdowns in their placement. The reasons for placement breakdown varied from negative experiences at home (such as not feeling at home or not feeling welcome, experiencing a lack of freedom, having conflicts with their carers about things such as finances or chores) to very serious allegations (such as maltreatment and neglect, carers not accepting the child's sexual orientation or religious affiliation, and carers telling lies about the child's life). In the following case, the maltreatment happened without the guardianship organization being aware of it for a period of time. With support from the birth family, the child finally found the courage to share what had happened:

*[Name of carer] let me live somewhere [...] Alone, while that is not allowed anyway, in a different house. [...] Occasionally, I can go to school without bread, at school I have to beg for bread of other students or sometimes I can live a month without food.* (Jean, 18 years old)

One child was very understanding about the placement breakdown. According to the child, carers were too busy with work and their own children to adequately take care of them.

#### 4.4.2. Foster carers' views

**Satisfaction with the foster placement.** All foster families were satisfied with the foster placement. Carers' reasons for being satisfied with the placement included that they liked not being 'alone' anymore, and that the child was supportive, sweet and 'in their heart'. One foster family was not fully satisfied with the foster placement and said that the child could be better behaved. One carer liked being busy doing things for the child:

*Now, we got a child. And I am busy with [this] child. With [washing and buying] clothing, with [making] food. I say when [name foster child] comes, I am going to make a cookie. With [cleaning] sleeping room, when he [is at] school.* (Aamiina, foster carer).

#### 4.4.3. Social workers' views

**Satisfaction with the foster placement.** All social workers were to some extent satisfied with the foster placement. Social workers rated a placement as successful if the child looked happy and well cared for, and performed well in terms of development, integration in the Netherlands and independence. The fact that carers did many things for the child, such as adjusting to the child's food preferences and encouraging the child, was also something positive, according to social workers. For some, the success of the placement related to existing family ties. Others considered the placement to be successful because they had not heard any complaints or identified signals relating to lack of safety. Before rating it as a positive placement, one social worker reported not being sure whether the placement was successful:

*The future will tell, but in itself I think [it is a successful placement], because I think that what a child from his age needs, is there. I do not know however, uhh, whether it is ideal for him. And I do not know either, whether another placement is more ideal.* (Nadja, social worker)

Some children did not leave the house much, did not have many social contacts or had to share their bedroom; these aspects were mentioned by social workers to indicate why they were *not fully* satisfied with the placement. Hearing negative things from the child as well as the carers also contributed to not being *fully* satisfied. In one placement, social workers had differing views on whether carers could offer an adequate caregiving environment for the child.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored the experiences of former unaccompanied children and unaccompanied children, their carers and social workers with the foster placement, with regard to the factors contributing to foster placement success as identified in the literature. In this paper, we addressed the factors of *cultural similarity*, *feeling at home*, *caregiving environment* and placement success. Our results show that, in general, participants were satisfied with the foster placement, with several children saying that they could not be more satisfied. In contrast to what we expected (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003), other children, who expressed some negative experiences during their foster placement or did not feel at home, still rated the placement as successful. In line with previous research (e.g., Brown, George, Sintzel, & St. Arnault, 2009; Wade, 2019), children and carers valued the cultural similarity of the foster placement. Former unaccompanied children considered cultural similarity to be less important. Overall, participants valued similarity of language the most. Some children did not feel at home in their foster placement or said that they could never feel at home there. Contrary to expectations (Barrie & Mendes, 2011, p. 493), namely that 'a cross-cultural placement is a barrier to feel at home', this study found that in cross-cultural placements as well as cultural placements children did not feel at home. Consistent with the study of Wade et al. (2012), in most foster families, the caregiving environment offered to children seemed adequate: most family relationships were normal to good and children were supported in practical issues by their carers.

In general, all participants were satisfied with the foster placement, something which might be expected as Nidos, the Dutch guardianship organization, is responsible for the safe and adequate reception of these children into foster families. On the other hand, it is striking that some children expressed negative experiences in their foster placement or did not feel at home in their foster family, and yet they still considered the placement to be successful. These children may not have felt free to give their opinion, especially if that opinion was negative. They may have felt that they only had bad alternatives to choose from (Kalverboer et al., 2017; Zijlstra et al., 2019) or were not aware of alternatives at all, as some children in our study also indicated. For example, it might be very difficult for children in kinship care to distance themselves from their own family or relatives, as they have no other 'intimate' relationships in the host country. Moreover, kinship placements are more



difficult to assess for non-Dutch social workers (Mathews, 1980, as cited in Linowitz & Boothby, 1988), possibly as a result of language barriers between carers and social workers. Therefore, it might take longer for social workers to be informed about problems. Also, traditional foster care – living with ‘strangers’ – was an unknown phenomenon for many unaccompanied children or had strong negative connotations for them (Hek, 2007), which means that traditional foster care might not be seen as an alternative for those in kinship care. Another explanation could be that children had learned to share ‘thin stories’, in which they provide a limited view of their lives. These stories often started during entry into the chosen host country and fitted ‘the narrow channels acceptable to [immigration and asylum officers]’ (Ayotte, 2000, as cited in Kohli, 2006, p. 710). Sharing these ‘thin stories’ is then continued in their relationship with social workers (Kolhi, 2006), possibly with regard not only to their past but also to family relationships at home. The results emphasize the added value of including the child’s perspective. Examining participant experiences of the factors contributing to the success of the placement *without including the child’s perspective* does not provide a valid picture.

The study also shows that, overall, participants valued similarity of language more highly than similarity of country of origin or religion. In line with previous studies, according to children as well as their carers similarity in language had many benefits (Luster et al., 2009; Ni Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade, 2019). Interestingly, participants interpreted this more broadly than having a shared *native* language (e.g. both speaking Arabic, while having a different native language). At the beginning of the placement, language similarity helped children to settle and made communication between children and foster families easier (Wade et al., 2012). Over time, relationships between children and carers developed. Building trust was found to be important for developing successful relationships between children and their carers (Wade et al., 2012) and, logically, a shared language contributed to building trust. Matching children and carers based on a shared language seems important for the success of the placement. However, creating a one-size-fits-all approach, whereby the needs and wishes of children and carers are not addressed (Hek, 2007, p. 114), does not seem desirable.

The results also showed that former unaccompanied children placed less value on cultural similarity. When former unaccompanied children arrive in the Netherlands, Dutch culture is new and probably strange to them. Children can feel displaced and they long for home. As time passes adaptation to the new culture – a process that helps children ‘to gain social acceptance and to strengthen their sense of self’ (Sleijpen, 2017, p. 49) – becomes a necessity, especially for those children who do not have relatives in the host country, and in this adaptation process a cultural foster family can become a burden. Former unaccompanied children also reported that feeling safe was more important to them than cultural similarity. Because children begin to feel safe in their everyday lives by finding predictable patterns (Kohli, 2011), cultural foster placements could provide a sense of continuity by offering such patterns (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988; Ni Raghallaigh, 2013). Therefore, this feeling of safety might be related to cultural similarity, especially at the beginning of a placement. A second explanation for the lesser appreciation of cultural similarity could be that former unaccompanied children were no longer in a dependency relationship with their foster carers (Sirriyeh, 2013); they might feel more comfortable sharing negative experiences about culture. All former unaccompanied children who experienced a placement breakdown were living in a kinship placement or in a culturally matched foster placement. Their previous experience may have reduced their interest in culturally similar placements.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to make clear pronouncements about cultural similarity between child and carers, as other reasons might underlie the level of appreciation. For example, for children who fled their country of origin because of their gender or sexual orientation, being placed in a foster family from their own culture could lead to

problems similar to those they experienced at home. Moreover, for those who were not granted a residence permit and had to return to their country of origin, a cultural foster family may have been helpful as it enabled the children to preserve their cultural identity and to practise speaking their native language. For children who obtained a residence permit, however, staying in a foster family from the host country probably helped them adapt to the new country and integrate into Dutch society.

Though the Netherlands is the only European country with a separate foster care system for unaccompanied refugee children (Schippers et al., 2016), children in (Dutch) regular foster care might also benefit from more research on cultural similarity (Anderson & Linares, 2012; Brown et al., 2009), as the Dutch regular fostering system lacks foster carers with a ‘certain religious and ethnic-cultural background, predominantly Islamic families from Turkish or Moroccan origin’ (Day & Bellaart, 2015).

As highlighted in the results, some children did not understand the concept of ‘feeling at home’. Other children equated it with feeling safe or other aspects of an adequate caregiving environment, such as receiving emotional support from carers. In several cases, the questions relating to caregiving environment indirectly covered the concept of ‘feeling at home’.

### 5.1. Strengths and limitations

This study is the first Dutch study to use data triangulation to examine the experiences of unaccompanied refugee children, their carers and social workers, with regard to the factors contributing to placement success. Although we made no attempt to seek similarities and differences in the experiences of the different perspectives per ‘case’, we expect that including all the perspectives on each placement contributed to a comprehensive picture of factors influencing placement success. A second strength of this study was that children were provided agency (Van Os et al., 2018). For example, they were able to choose their own interview location, which allowed them to talk freely about their lives in foster care. This is underlined by the fact that some children decided to meet at a location other than their own home. Also, by offering non-verbal methods, children could choose their preferred way of sharing their stories (i.e., with or without the use of non-verbal methods). The differences in children’s preferences highlighted the importance of providing these options; there is not one preferred method.

Limitations of the study include the small and diverse sample size. This includes an ability to consider the impact of preplacement factors and mental health in the children’s experience of life with a foster family during resettlement. In the explorative study a wide spectrum of topics was discussed, which led to the development of the longitudinal study with similar – though slightly adjusted and shortened – research instruments. With regard to the wide spectrum of topics and the use of triangulation, feasibility also played an important role with this ‘hard-to-reach’ participant group. Consequently, the sample size of the longitudinal study consisted of about 40 children, their carers and guardians. In addition, two foster families did not participate. The reasons for this were language constraints and not wanting to take part. Inclusion of these families would possibly have led to more negative results. Moreover, two children who did not meet the inclusion criteria were still included, because they were still living with carers (i.e., former unaccompanied children) or had lived with carers in their country of origin (i.e., unaccompanied children). The ongoing bond might have contributed to more positive results. Also, as with other retrospective studies (e.g., Luster et al., 2009), former unaccompanied children sometimes had difficulty recollecting their experiences. Although they had to reflect on how they felt about their previous placement, their responses potentially reflected their current opinions and not their views on ‘back then’.

## 5.2. Implications for research

Future research could benefit from a longitudinal design since none of the studies focusing on unaccompanied children in foster care have examined the course of the foster placement. It would be interesting to include 'time in the Netherlands' and 'placement duration' as variables in order to better explain the differences in results between former unaccompanied children and unaccompanied children (especially in relation to appreciation of cultural similarity). Moreover, as highlighted in the results, participants had difficulty filling in some parts of the questionnaires (i.e., scaling questions; the concepts of 'ethnicity' and 'feeling at home'), most of which could be resolved through extensive explanation. Future research might benefit from interpreters who could help overcome some of the language barriers (Wade et al., 2012, p. 72).

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jet Rip:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration. **Elianne Zijlstra:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Wendy Post:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Margrite Kalverboer:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Erik J. Knorth:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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